

EUROPEAN UNION LAW OBSERVATORY: TECHNOLOGY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

A negative effect of globalization on society is that people now have more control than ever over their immediate environment but have no control over processes such as European integration that are marking their futures. These processes are happening beyond their environment, and understanding them requires a high degree of knowledge and operating control of the information systems and new information technologies. Law degree teachers help their students to acquire sufficient knowledge of these systems but they need new resources to achieve better results for the operating control of information systems and new information technologies within the European Union framework.

For the past three years, the University of Huelva has supported an innovative teaching project which I direct, called: the EUROPEAN UNION LAW OBSERVATORY.

This is a virtual and lecture-based resource for all compulsory or optional courses taken by third-year Law students whose study programmes include European Union (EU) Law.

The students who join the Observatory acquire specific technical training on how to manage EU sources of information through the Europa portal. The idea is to teach them to learn, to make the most of the resources available and to acquire skills that enable them to handle these tools simply, efficiently and with confidence.

"A student who teaches another student also teaches himself." With this in mind, the Observatory is run by a student scholarship holder in class and by online technicians at the European Commission's Europe-Direct centre in Huelva, who are on hand to provide students with support whenever necessary. This methodology aims to optimize the students' learning experience, get them involved and create effective leaders.

Through the EEES pilot project, students will learn how to use the Europa website in order to have access to all the information on EU sources online. At the same time, working groups will be set up during the year for course-based research work, debate and exposition via the University of Huelva's virtual platform. The Observatory coordinator will choose the best work for broadcast on UNIRADIO, Huelva University's in-house radio station. Over time, a student might forget what he learnt about EU Law but thanks to this project he will not forget where and how to look for the information necessary for doing his job.

This uniquely innovative project is part of the debate on "European Governance" initiated by the European Commission in its White Paper of July 2001 [1], and which comprises the set of regulations, procedures and practices related to the way power is exercised in the EU. The aim is to adopt new forms of governance that draw the EU closer to its citizens, make it more efficient, strengthen democracy in Europe and consolidate the legitimacy of its institutions. The EU Law Observatory, as the University of Huelva's interlocutor with Europe, opens a dialogue with the Europa portal on improving the quality, efficiency and simplicity of European legislation.

Keywords: European Union Law, technology in teaching and learning, learning and teaching innovation, e-learning experiences, virtual Universities.

1 JUSTIFICATION

The report of the *Commission for Innovation in Teaching in Andalusian Universities* [2] insists on the need for university teachers to be able to respond to the demands of the interdisciplinary knowledge that they teach. In twelve years teaching EU Law, I have been able to see the enormous difficulties faced by the students in the search for and understanding of the sources of EU Law. Mandatory regulations, directives that have to be carried out by the national authorities, the decisions and rulings

of advisory bodies and, especially, the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg that doesn't even appear in Spanish, are regular sources for theoretical study. From the third year of a degree, all the areas of Law are informed by European Law, and consequently they demand in their programmes an exhaustive study of the laws adopted by the Union. Faced with the difficulties in obtaining, selecting and contrasting the information, the teacher ends up bringing material to class, demanding, in the majority of cases, personalized study with later collective resolution.

The intention with the *EU Law Observatory* project is to fill this gap in the learning process. "Teaching them to Learn". To maximize the online resources that the "Europa" website offers us, as well as the local European Commission offices to which the citizens have access. Although students might, with the passing of time, forget the content of materials related to EU Law, thanks to this project, they won't forget *where and how to look for the information* necessary to carry out their professional roles. It is also intended that no law student at the University of Huelva will be able to finish their degree without knowing in detail how to manage the EU Law sources through online access, and also that the content of the Observatory will be put at the disposal of the rest of the University community. The main intention of the model that is proposed is that students will at all times be aware of the process of learning, and will understand what they learn, know how to apply it and understand its meaning and the social and professional usefulness of what they learn in the field of EU Law.

2 OBJECTIVES

University degree training consists of the mastering of general basic knowledge and specialized knowledge, sustained by the development of abilities and the achievement of instrumental, interpersonal and system skills. The *EU Law Observatory* project is related to obtaining the following skills:

- system skills: ability to apply knowledge of EU Law to practice; interpretation of EU legal texts (Regulations, Directives, rulings, etc.), especially case law from the European Court of Justice; research skills; ability to learn; ability to work autonomously; oral presentation.
- specific skills of an instrumental character: information management: use of technological tools; "Europa" web page: www.europa.eu
- interpersonal skills: development of reflective awareness, ability to think critically and work in a team.

In short, it deals with helping Law students obtain all the correct skills they need, improving their ability to analyse and summarize EU Law sources.

As well as achieving these learning and teaching objectives, the project aims to be the "University of Huelva's interlocutor with Europe". It aims to be a channel which brings the offices of the European Commission in Huelva closer to the students and thanks to its results being published on the University radio station, it will also help to bring Europe closer to the people of Huelva.

3 METHODOLOGY

The combination of individual work, interaction and cooperative work between equals and communication with the tutor (the coordinator) are the fundamental methodological aspects of the teaching project.

- Teaching strategies:

First, the students who join the *Observatory* acquire specific technical training on how to manage EU sources of information through the Europa portal. The idea is to teach them to learn, to make the most of the resources available and to acquire skills that enable them to handle these tools simply, efficiently and with confidence.

Second, creating working groups of 4 to 6 students for the carrying out of study and participative projects within the framework of the *Observatory*. Within these will be promoted activities involving search, consultation, information handling, observation, experimentation, debate and final public presentation to share the results with the rest of the students.

The framework of work is both on campus and virtual. We have a room in the Law Faculty where a scholarship holder will be located and technological and bibliographical material put at the disposal of

all the work groups. The room will be a place of research, debate, discussion, consent and online information searches.

The tutoring and the presentation of the work is virtual and is an important opportunity to go deeper into what is being taught and work on the acquisition of oratorical and speech-giving skills and development of reflective awareness.

4 SCHEDULING

- October

Firstly, the teachers involved in the project commit to coordinate its contents and to carry out planning between areas for the better optimization of the Observatory and its use for each one of the core third-year degree subjects (it's important to underline the efficiency of the coordination system involving the teachers within the framework of the monthly meetings that are usually held in the Law Faculty for all the courses under the supervision of the Vice Dean of European Convergence).

Secondly, buying material: reference materials for the student's use.

- November

First Training Month aimed at all students under the supervision of the Project Coordinator and European trainers (Europe Direct Centre in Huelva).

- Selection of the scholarship holder.

- From November to January

constitution of the work groups. Assignment of research tasks. Use of the *Observatory* with the support of the selected scholarship holder. Tutor-led discussion and analysis by the coordinator. Oral presentations in class and virtual.

- End of January

Report of activities and evaluation of the work done relative to the creation of the Community case law database regarding Spain.

- February

Second Training Month "of specific character", aimed at all students under the supervision of the Project Coordinator and European trainers (Europe Direct Centre in Huelva).

- From February to April

constitution of the working groups for the second four-month term. Assignment of research tasks. Use of the *Observatory* with the support of the selected scholarship holder. Tutor-led discussion and analysis by the coordinator. Oral presentations in class and virtual.

- End of April

Report of activities and finalization of the work relative to the creation of the Community case law database regarding Spain.

- May

Month of Europe: "Dialogue with the citizens". A month dedicated to presenting the results of the project on University of Huelva Radio (UNIRADIO).

-June

Evaluation of the activity of the *Observatory* and presentation of results to the Dean and Law Faculty and The Vice Rector of Teaching Innovation and European Convergence.

5 PROJECTION

The projection of the *Observatory* cannot be doubted:

All the subjects of Positive Law in the higher years contain matters affected by EU Law.

All the university students need to learn the techniques that help to adapt their professional performance with new learning that helps them not to stagnate workwise or professionally in a European Union in a constant state of change. Correct management of Community sources by online access to the documents offered on the "Europa" web site will help keep theoretical knowledge current for life. This project of teaching innovation is, therefore, directly related to better teaching training, but also with the resolution of problems linked with the exercise of the profession of jurist in all its aspects, as we are all citizens involved in this European project.

In short, the intention is to create a public service for all the students of the University of Huelva who have to carry out work, research or tasks related to European Law. An authentic linking forum between the University of Huelva and the "Europa" web site.

6 RESOURCES

6.1 Available human resources, materials and infrastructure

- 11 full-time teachers.
- class room in the Law Faculty.
- I.T. support.

6.2 Requested resources

The project will take part in an annual competition organised by the Vice Rector of Teaching Innovation and European Convergence, in which the best projects in teaching innovation will be chosen. Once awarded the project, we usually ask for:

- scholarship holder. The scholarship holder will carry out their support and teaching work in the mornings and afternoons, for twenty hours a week. They will be a direct link with the Centre of the European Union in Huelva; they will have thorough training to enable them to give the best support to the rest of the students, they will help with every question asked by the work groups tutored by the Project Coordinator; they will prepare a database on the case law of the European Court of Justice regarding Spain and offer it to the university community.
- Laptops with internet access. To run a teaching innovation project that seeks to improve the efficiency of online access to community documentation, technological equipment is essential to carry out the work of the scholarship holders and work groups.
- Basic library on EU Law available to the students in the room fitted-out for the Observatory. The intention is for the *Observatory* to be a meeting point, a room for study, debate, discussion, and research for the various work groups that, independently of the materials obtained online, will need theoretical training that supports the basic texts selected by the Coordinator. A perfect combination of theoretical and practical learning of a subject that easily becomes out-dated in a Europe of 27 states that requires constant updating.
- Funding for two training months. Run by the EUROPE DIRECT Centre of the Huelva Provincial Council. General training seminars are anticipated for the group of third-year students at the start of the four-month term and a permanent online consultation point.

7 EVALUATION

- Evaluations are anticipated of the results obtained by the different work group, as well as the word of the support scholarship holder.
- An explanatory report of all activity will be delivered.
- A database of Community case law regarding Spain will be published for public use by the whole university community, as a climax to activities of the third year of the Law degree,

8 RESULTS

At the end of the course, questionnaires are given to the students to evaluate the efficiency of the

Observatory in teaching EU Law. 90% of the students positively evaluate the training courses, the teamwork, the support scholarship holder and the broadcasting of the results on Uniradio. They say that they learnt to manage on-line resources and that the course has taught them to assimilate the material more easily. The students who follow the project for the entire year normally get better grades.

Aspects that need improvement: As much for the students as the teachers, combining virtual teaching with on-campus teaching sometimes requires an excessive workload. Also, as the teaching innovation project is voluntary, not all the students acquire these skills. Lastly, we have to improve access to The Observatory for the rest of the university community, sometimes students of other disciplines don't know the Observatory exists. Also, as virtual access is only possible if the student is studying EU Law, online access for other students is impossible.

REFERENCES

- [1] Commission of the European Communities. European Governance. A White Paper, 2001. COM (2001) 428 final.
- [2] Commission for Innovation in Teaching in Andalusian Universities. Report on teaching in Andalusian Universities, 2005.